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An Albia Childhood

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An Albia Childhood

H. ROGER GRANT

AT TIMES I have thought about how my childhood in Iowa has affected my life. Such reflections usually occur when I return from out-of-state to visit family members and friends or to attend high school reunions or other functions. If I had been raised in Ohio or South Carolina, I might have had similar experiences, but not necessarily. A small-town midwestern upbringing, in my mind, offered a special set of challenges and opportunities.

I grew up in Albia, seat of Monroe County, located in the rolling landscape of southern Iowa. Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, my paternal grandparents, Samuel "S. M." and Rose Heimann Grant, arrived in town. Grandfather Grant, who two decades earlier had emigrated from the highlands of Scotland and later settled in Kansas City, Kansas, and had married my Berlin-born grandmother, saw Albia as a place of possibilities. The family business became S. M. Grant & Company, a wholesale fruit and vegetable firm located in a two-story brick building on East Washington Avenue in the heart of what residents called the "Farm Block." After graduating from high school, my father, Harry, born in Olathe, Kansas, in 1900, joined the concern and helped to expand operations.

H. Roger Grant, Kathryn and Calhoun Lemon Professor of History at Clemson University, received his B.A. degree from Simpson College in 1966 and his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Missouri in 1967 and 1970. In 2003 his alma mater awarded him the Doctor of Humane Letters. A prolific railroad historian, he has recently completed his latest book project, *Twilight Rails: Railroad Building in the Midwest, 1905-1930*, forthcoming from the University of Minnesota Press.

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My maternal grandfather, Henry "Hank" Dinsmore, came to Monroe County from Kirkville in neighboring Wapello County, where his father had been the beloved village physician. Initially, though, he lived in Hiteman, a bustling coal-mining camp in Guilford Township northwest of Albia. There he met, courted, and in 1901 married my grandmother, Katherine Beerkle, a native of Creston. Her father, a German-born butcher, held the lucrative fresh meat concession awarded by the Wapello Coal Company, which dominated the Hiteman economy. Securing that position was a welcomed turn of events since my great grandfather's livelihood in the railroad town of Creston had been nearly ruined by the economic fallout of the bitter locomotive engineer's strike of 1888. In Hiteman Grandfather Dinsmore owned the much larger of the two drugstores and developed a thriving business.

Then in 1915 the family moved to Albia, building a handsome frame house on an acreage near the eastern outskirts. My grandparents wished to have better educational opportunities for their two daughters, Marcella, my mother, who was born in Hiteman in 1903, and Eleanor ("Dinny"), who arrived five years later. My grandparents also seemed troubled by the influx of eastern and southern Europeans to Hiteman. In my grandparents' minds, those newer immigrants challenged the dominance of the Welsh, Swedes, and native born in the community. Yet for years Grandfather Dinsmore continued to operate his store in Hiteman, usually commuting on the eight-mile Albia-to-Hiteman line of the Albia Interurban Railway. Later he opened a drugstore, located a few steps off the Albia public square on North Clinton Street, then known as Wall Street.

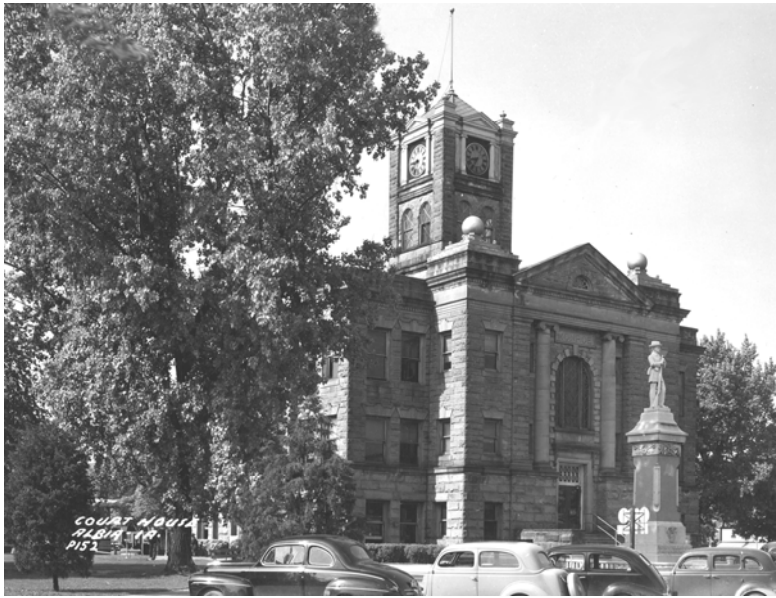
Before I was born in 1943, my hometown, with its more than 5,000 residents, had experienced both good and bad times. For decades Albia claimed to be the "Coal Capital" of Iowa. Miners and their families, who lived mostly in the nearby coal camps of Hiteman, Hocking, and Rizerville, provided much economic stimulation. After 1908 "these men who spend" and their family members could "take the cars" of the electric interurban to Albia to shop and partake of the services of this dynamic place. But then the Great Depression and drought conditions of the 1930s struck, virtually destroying the coal-mining



The structures on South Main Street on the east side of the public square in Albia housed a variety of stores on the street level and offices, fraternal halls and private apartments on the second floors. The smokestack in the background belongs to the Albia Light & Railway Company. When this postcard view was made in about 1950, the power company no longer operated an interurban railroad or generated electricity for local consumption, but rather provided steam heat for downtown commercial buildings and some nearby houses. All photos courtesy of the author.

industry and badly damaging agriculture. The New Deal relief and recovery programs, including a Civilian Conservation Corps camp near Grandmother Dinsmore's home (Grandfather Dinsmore had died in 1931) helped, but Albia, Monroe County, and the surrounding areas continued to lag economically. Even with the wartime surge, many struggled. Fortunately, scores of farmers remained solvent by augmenting their income with full-time jobs, often at the John Deere and John Morrell plants in Ottumwa, 20 miles to the east.

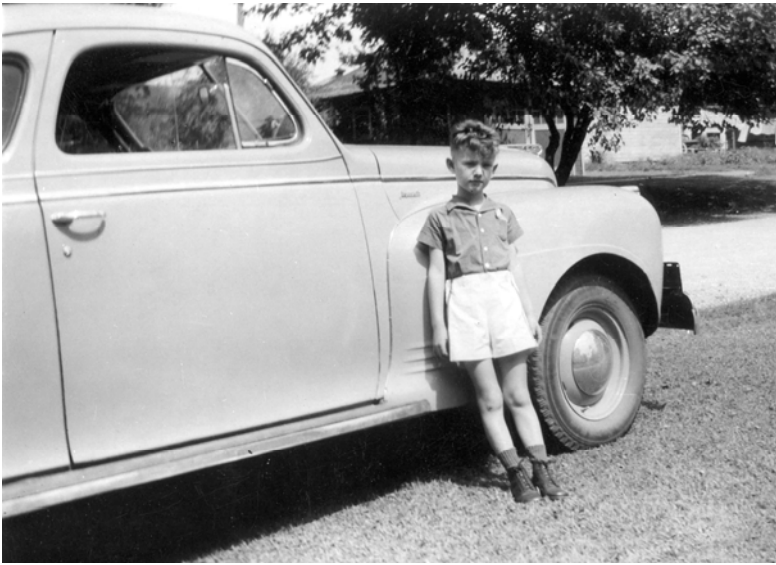
As a child I sensed that there had been past glory days and days that were less so. Yet Albia was always busy on Saturdays, when farmers came to town to shop and gossip, making it at times difficult to negotiate the crowds around the courthouse square. When I got my license for my first bicycle, I remember receiving a book of rules. The only ordinance that I recall stated that no one was to ride a two-wheeler in the commercial center on Saturday afternoons and evenings. That made me reluctant to attempt such an illegal act, although I never knew anyone who had been warned, let alone fined.



Albia's signature building, the Monroe County courthouse on the public square, is captured in this postcard (ca. 1950). It had changed little since its construction in 1903–1904.

While there might be crowds “uptown” on Saturdays, I realized that Albia was hardly a boom town. There were few new buildings, either commercial or residential. As a child a pleasant Sunday ritual in good weather was to take “a buggy ride.” That was what Grandmother Dinsmore, who lived on the second floor of our house at 304 South Clinton Street, called these periodic car rambles. We would look at the “new houses,” several homes that stood near the rutted road that led to the private Albia Country Club. I recall, too, positive comments made about houses that were recently painted. A combination of war-time rationing and lack of money resulted in scores of dwellings badly needing a coat or two of paint.

While we lauded every improvement, my grandmother expressed considerable anguish when we drove over the often dusty “Hitman Road” to what had become mostly a ghost town. My grandmother detested the Hitman destination, especially when we passed the former drugstore and the overgrown



Roger Grant stands by the family car, a 1941 Plymouth, in the side yard of his boyhood home on South Clinton Street. It is his first day of kindergarten at nearby Grant School.

lot on "Dude Hill" where the family's house once stood. By the early 1950s the drugstore building had become a tavern, one of the few surviving commercial structures. The house, however, was gone, having been moved to a farm along Highway 60 (today's Highway 5) in the southern part of the county. I realized that conditions had changed dramatically for Hiteman. It was somewhat difficult for me to visualize a community of approximately 2,500 residents, although picture postcards, which my grandmother had saved, helped me to place what I had seen in the context of the early twentieth century.

Those Sunday jaunts always included, along with my Grandmother Dinsmore and me, my mother, a widow since my father's death from complications of an automobile wreck and heart disease in 1944. Occasionally my adopted brother Richard ("Dick"), who was almost exactly ten years older than I, joined us, but as a teenager he had a steady girlfriend and Sunday afternoons were usually spent with her. Then in 1952, soon after graduation from Albia High School, Dick and a buddy, unan-

nounced, joined the U.S. Marine Corps, and within a year Dick was severely wounded by "friendly fire" in Korea. Grandfather Grant, widowed since the late 1930s and who until his death in 1955 lived above the now closed family business, occasionally accompanied us.

The past was very much a part of my childhood. When Grandmother Dinsmore gathered with relatives and friends, conversations inevitably turned to what I considered to be ancient history. Life in Hiteman was a common topic. Nearly all of these people were elderly, and events in their earlier lives were important. Yet I liked hearing about trips that my grandmother made as a child on Mississippi River steamboats operated by distant relatives, the Weyerhaeusers, and her race in an automobile with an interurban car that led to a minor accident and the self-imposed end of her driving career. My friends and I loved the story, probably embellished, that Grandfather Grant told about witnessing the Jesse James Gang rob a bank in Kansas City.

There were more than stories about the past. My home surroundings possessed museum-like qualities. After my parents married in 1927, they became collectors of antiques. Mother especially liked pattern glass; my father preferred furniture, particularly pieces that he could refinish. I remember my mother happily recalling the purchase of all the household possessions of a Civil War veteran for \$100, a handsome sum during the Great Depression.

Perhaps it's understandable that, growing up in this history-charged environment, I became interested in old things. While my large collection of matchbook covers didn't have much historical significance, my ever-growing holdings of old automobile license plates probably did. I scoured alleys, asked neighbors and "old timers," and attended household sales for these artifacts. Most were free, and I usually could afford the 10¢ or 25¢ that I occasionally had to pay at an auction. And nobody ever bid against me.

This fascination for the past, especially for collectibles, led to what I considered to be a brilliant idea: I would open a museum. The year was 1955, and I was 11. At that time my mother and I lived in a spacious second-floor apartment in a magnificent Victorian brick house at 204 Benton Avenue East, next to St. Mary's

Roman Catholic Church and across the street from the Carnegie-Evans Library and the Kendall Place, former home of Iowa governor Nathan Kendall. The owner, Jessie Powell Prizer, who was in her eighties, lived downstairs in the house that had been home to her and her late merchant husband and also her parents. In later years her brother, Dr. Burke Powell, had had his medical office on the second floor. The house featured a full third floor and tower section. Already the former ballroom area contained fascinating items, including stereopticon views of ghastly skin diseases and a skeleton that Mrs. Prizer remembered her physician father had assembled from the corpse of a vagrant. What a perfect place for a museum!

I decided that Albia's first museum would not be a solo undertaking. My longtime playmate, Helen Humeston, who was a year younger and lived two doors from my former home on South Clinton Street, was also interested in old things. Her father, a mortician and furniture store dealer, possessed a large gun collection, and both her mother and Grandmother Humeston were antique enthusiasts.

A museum interested Helen, and soon we cleaned out most of the corner tower and a section of the ballroom, selected items from a supportive (and probably surprised) Mrs. Prizer, asked my mother and the Humestons for contributions, and set up the exhibits, in no particular order. The signature piece was a huge 45-star American flag that we hung from the ceiling. Helen and I distributed flyers that announced the museum, noted the afternoon hours of operation, and listed the admission charge of 10¢. Visitors climbed the steep outside staircase; entered the second floor through the former medical reception room, then a bedroom used occasionally by my brother, an art student in Chicago; and walked through a hall to the attic stairwell.

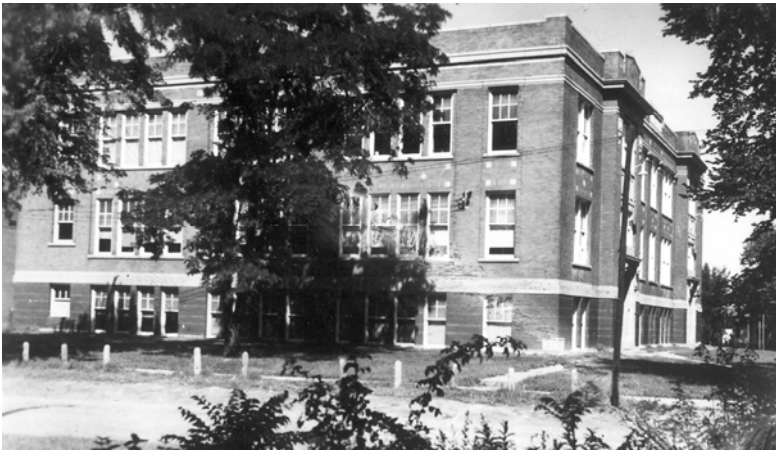
During that summer there were visitors, 50 or more, and non-paying family members and friends. More significant was the additional interest that developed. Robert Larson, the Albia newspaper editor, sensed the value of a human interest story. Not long after a front-page feature appeared in the *Albia Union Republican*, the *Des Moines Tribune* sent a reporter to interview me. Soon he wrote a lengthy piece that described the museum and took pleasure in my ignorance of Tiffany & Company,

maker of one of the Civil War swords. Even though the museum had closed, KTVO, the Ottumwa television station, invited Helen and me to be guests on the *Kay Ray Show*, an event that impressed my classmates in the sixth grade at Grant School, perhaps because they received an early dismissal to watch the program in nearby homes.

Long before the attic museum venture, I developed a fascination for trains. Some of my earliest memories involve railroads. The most vivid were rides in my stroller that my mother pushed to the Burlington or "Q" depot so that I could watch a streamliner or any passing train. Before I entered kindergarten, I often walked the five or six blocks to the yards of the Minneapolis & St. Louis (M&StL) and Wabash railroads, where I poked around freight equipment, watched cars being interchanged, played on the turntable, and smelled the pungent (and pleasing) aroma of creosote. Why this interest? Perhaps I liked big things that moved. Trains and dinosaurs, I believe, hold an attraction for small children, but after a few years the allure of ancient creatures for me had faded.

My love of railroads did not flag, however; if anything, it grew. I haunted the depots for timetables and asked railroad employees if they had any memorabilia, old or new. I loved to walk, especially with friends, across the bridges that carried South Main and South Clinton streets over the Burlington's "cut-off," particularly when a steam locomotive passed underneath or the morning *California Zephyr* sped eastward. Later, as a teenager, I helped members of the Iowa Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society work on their equipment stored on the Southern Iowa Railway, a freight-only electric road that operated between Centerville and Moravia. And I took delight in the fall trips that catered to railroad fans. After my junior year in high school, I decided to run for a seat on the Iowa Commerce Commission at Iowa's Hawkeye Boys State, and I easily won. When fellow Boys Staters visited the Iowa capitol, my election victory allowed me to chat with commission staff members, and my intense interest in railroads seemed to surprise them.

Albia offered other pleasures. I enjoyed school, even though for most of the years that I attended Grant Elementary School my mother was the kindergarten teacher. Fortunately, I had



Constructed in 1912, the former Albia High School building once accommodated both the high school and Albia Junior College. This image dates from about 1950, about 10 years after the junior college closed. Grant entered this school in the fall of 1958 and graduated in the spring of 1962.

“Miss Mary” Terrell for kindergarten, although not long after school began in the fall of 1949, she died tragically. Her replacement, Mildred Doyle, seemed to give me special attention, perhaps because of my mother, but I deeply missed Miss Mary. No secrets at school could be kept from my mother, including missing recess because of “talking out of turn” in Velma Jones’s first-grade class. Discipline was firm, and everyone seemed to value education. From grade school through high school there was no stigma if you behaved, studied hard, and achieved academic success.

Memorable teachers did much to shape my life. There was Viva Miller, my eighth-grade English teacher; Gladys Smith, the high school Latin teacher; Donald Vinson, the young and dynamic chemistry and physics instructor; and, most of all, Marie Cain, the jolly high school English, dramatics, and speech instructor. There were clunkers, but they were rare.

Other activities beckoned a boy in small-town Iowa. Outings with friends on their farms were a highlight of summer vacation, especially if they had a stock pond, and so was shooting rats with BB guns and .22 rifles at the city dump. We also

played basketball, usually in someone's driveway, swam in the old, cracked pool at the country club or later in the new municipal pool that adjoined the city park, and rode bikes *everywhere*, even into the distant countryside.

And I haunted the library. I especially enjoyed the few books on conducting science experiments, in part because I had received a Gilbert chemistry set as a Christmas gift. I liked history, too. Books on wars, especially the Civil War, appealed to me. Then there was that section that contained the Iowa history collection. Although I didn't spend much time with political studies or the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, I adored the heavily illustrated copies of *The Palimpsest*. A real pleasure came from discovering the series of illustrated articles on Iowa railroads that Frank P. Donovan Jr. began to contribute in the early 1950s. I read them and reread them, virtually memorizing portions of the issues on the M&StL and Chicago Great Western, two of my favorite railroads. I was not surprised when the librarian, Beulah Mabry, told me that an instructor from Drake University, who taught an evening state history course locally as part of that school's extension program, said that these Iowa holdings were the best he'd seen in a small-town library. I knew that this was true.

In my journeys around Albia I sensed that there was something of an economic division. Several of my playmates lived in houses with outside toilets, and their mothers, unlike mine, did not own Haviland china or crystal goblets. I knew that Aunt Grace, my father's younger sister, and her husband, John Griffin, a banker, had some means. Their house was beautiful, filled with antiques and the latest electric appliances, and they always drove a late-model Buick or Oldsmobile. Their son Jack, who was eight years older than I, owned a huge model train layout with many mechanical marvels that annually appeared about Thanksgiving time in their sparkling clean basement. I was highly envious of Jack's nifty possessions.

But unlike a place like Hiteman, which unmistakably had a better section, Albia was different. Except for those few new houses, there was no "good" part of town. Alfred Pabst, the lawyer, lived not far from the old box factory near the Burlington depot. J. E. King, the affable president of the "southside"

bank that competed with Uncle John's "northside" institution, resided near the Wabash tracks among some modest dwellings. And Dr. G. A. Jenkins, the quintessential country physician, owned a fine brick and stucco house that stood adjacent to Oak View Cemetery and next to several small homes and across the street from a weed-choked vacant lot. Nice houses adjoined not-so-nice houses; there was no discernable pattern of residential segregation. If there was an exception, it would be "Colored Town," a collection of several houses northwest of the Burlington depot. But this small cluster of homes owned or rented by African Americans included the attractive, ranch-style house of the town's prominent black family, the Graysons. The kindly Mr. Grayson worked in the post office (and later became postmaster) and was an active member of First Methodist Church and several civic organizations.

Albia, however, was not utopia. There might be nearly first-run movies at the King Theater, but there was virtually no exposure to ballet, classical music, or quality plays. That would be possible only if one traveled 70 miles to Des Moines or more to some other city. Mildred Bates's dance reviews, Thursday night summer band concerts, and junior and senior class plays hardly constituted highbrow culture. Ratty carnivals and occasionally a one-ring circus came to town, but my mother warned me about the former, although she might take me to the latter.

Sports opportunities were also somewhat limited. Of course, there was basketball and football, at least for boys. My mother had been a star on the high school girls' basketball team in the early 1920s, but by the post-World War II years, females lacked the opportunity to play varsity sports. The high school had track and golf teams (I tried the latter because golf not only allowed me to skip last period study hall but also to observe operations on the Burlington and M&StL whose tracks adjoined the Albia Country Club), but there were no tennis or swimming teams and hence no opportunities for those personal athletic pursuits.

There was also the presence of "vice," which meant taverns and pool halls. Although my brother patronized Pat Rogers's billiards parlor, usually without family knowledge, I was too cautious, realizing that the smell of cigarette smoke and stale beer probably meant trouble. Yet with several pals, especially

Phil Morgan, I tried smoking, including corn silks. However, burnt fingers and coughing often resulted, for me effective behavior modification.

And some truly nasty people lived in Albia. One memorable person was Mr. Benjamin, whose home, an unpainted former neighborhood grocery store with attached living quarters, stood at the corner of South Clinton Street and Sixth Avenue across from Grant School. Every year this cranky, old man and his wizened wife, who seldom spoke, planted a big garden, likely out of economic necessity. The playground was a short kickball distance from the growing or about to be harvested vegetables, and the red ball seemed to have a magnetic attraction to Mr. Benjamin's awaiting hands. Notwithstanding complaints from teachers and the principal, he sometimes gleefully burned the ball (or even balls) in an old 55-gallon oil barrel as we watched. There were rumors that at Halloween the Benjamins placed pins and razor blades in candy and cookies. But when I joined friends for trick-or-treating, we avoided the creepy Benjamin place. Then there was Mrs. Winters, the feisty wife of Billy Winters, a county road employee who, like Mrs. Benjamin, never seemed to talk. An avid flower grower at her tidy home on South Clinton Street, Mrs. Winters unquestionably hated animals (and probably children, too). When pets wandered into her yard, especially dogs who during hot spells liked to drink from or cool off in her fish and lily pond, they stood a chance of disappearing forever. A neighbor once told my mother that Mrs. Winters killed dogs and cats with a shovel and either buried them along the back alley or during the heating season threw their carcasses into the coal furnace. That may not have been true, but I always wondered how this stalwart of First Methodist Church, and a person who gave excruciatingly long and tearful prayers in Sunday School, could be so cruel.

In Albia, as in probably every small town, it was difficult to keep secrets. The freshest gossip was learned at Fred Dunkin's Mobil Oil gas station, on benches outside the courthouse, and at the Bluebird Café or Brawdy's drugstore. After church, worshipers chatted, not always showing Christian charity. It was an environment where everyone knew almost everyone else and their business, whether good or bad.



For more than seven decades the edifice of Albia's First Methodist Church stood on the corner of South Clinton Street and Second Avenue West and served the largest Protestant congregation in Albia and Monroe County.

Another limitation, although I did not realize it at the time, was the relatively modest choices of churches. Several denominations dominated the religious life of Albia: Roman Catholic (likely the largest), Methodist, the largest Protestant church, Disciples of Christ (Christian), and Presbyterian. Smaller congregations also were represented, including the Church of the Nazarene, Episcopal, Open Bible, Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints, and Society of Friends. My father's family were Presbyterians, a direct legacy of the Church of Scotland. My mother had been baptized in the Congregational church in Hiteman, but when the family moved to Albia, the Dinsmores

gravitated to Methodism. I, too, had a Methodist experience: Sunday School, with three years of perfect attendance, Methodist Youth Fellowship meetings, and the occasional church-sponsored outing. I must have inherited my mother's tendency to be a religious seeker. In time she became a Catholic, in part because of Irish Catholic friends and a preference for things liturgical, but I moved in a much different direction, first joining the Unitarian Universalist Church and in more recent years embracing the tenets of the Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Science). Albia never offered a Unitarian or Universalist option, and for only a brief time was there a Christian Science Society. As a young adult there was really no opportunity to be exposed to ultra-liberal or metaphysical faiths.

On reflection, spending my first 18 years in a small county-seat community in the Hawkeye State placed me on the right course for my future education and profession. Many of my classmates in the Class of 1962 who planned to attend college shied away from big and what most believed to be impersonal universities, although a few selected Iowa State University and the University of Iowa. If I had been female, I would have considered Stephens College, a private two-year women's school in Columbia, Missouri, where mother, Aunt Dinny, and cousin Nancy Griffin had attended. I thought about Grinnell College, partly because Aunt Grace was an alumna and Dennis Homerin, "Homer," who graduated a year ahead of me, was a student. I loved that the main line of the M&StL sliced directly through the campus. But a visit convinced me that Grinnell was surely too radical for me. At the time I was a dyed-in-the-wool Republican, who during the 1956 presidential campaign had worn shirts literally covered with "I Like Ike" and "I Like Ike Even Better" buttons. And during my junior year in high school I had spent a week in Washington, D.C., as a guest of John Kyl, the conservative Republican congressman from Iowa's Fourth District. I picked the small and non-threatening Simpson College in Indianola, and it proved to be a good fit. After all, the school had awarded me a scholarship, and before enrolling I had chatted with the affable Joe Walt, a professor of history, who enthusiastically sold the college and suggested the possibilities of history as a field of study.



Active in high school and collegiate debating, Grant, in a lighter moment (seated front right) is surrounded by the 1965–66 Simpson College debate team, coached by Professor Richard J. de Laubenfels.

The distinguished Simpsonian George Washington Carver once said, “At Simpson I discovered that I was a human being”; from my perspective, at Simpson I discovered that I could become a historian. Rather than pursuing a career in museum work, I decided that I wanted to teach at the college level. I continued my education at the University of Missouri with financial assistance from a National Defense Education Act Title IV fellowship and a Woodrow Wilson Dissertation Fellowship. Then in 1970, with Ph.D. in hand but with limited classroom experience, I began a 26-year stint at the University of Akron in Ohio, and in 1996 I relocated to Clemson University in South Carolina. Just as the past and trains had been a pleasurable part of my life in Albia, they remain important to me as a teacher and researcher. For years I have offered undergraduate and graduate students courses on the history of American transportation. Twenty of my 25 books have been on railroad subjects, including histories of three Iowa carriers, Chicago Great Western (1984), Chicago & North Western (1996), and Wabash (2004).

Although it might sound corny, I have always considered myself an Iowan. I quickly learned in my present home location that it is much better to say that you are from Iowa than from Ohio; the Hawkeye State has a positive or at least neutral image among native-born Southerners. And at some point I expect to be buried in the beautiful and memory-filled Oak View Cemetery in Albia.